

A LIFELINE TO LANGUAGE

Sign Language for Children with Special Needs

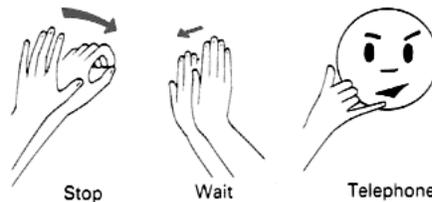
By Melanie G. Snyder

Research has shown that delays or disorders in speech and language can have a major impact on a child's social, behavioral and academic development. Using sign language to help any child who has such delays to communicate can provide numerous benefits, says Maureen E. Burnham, MS, CCC-SLP, co-owner of Spectrum Pediatrics in Arlington, Virginia. "Sign language allows the child with delayed speech or language (or those who are non-verbal) the opportunity to express wants and needs, and to socialize with adults and peers. This empowerment to communicate changes lives," says Burnham.

Helen Keller referred to the ability to communicate through signing as, "the life belt of language." With sign language, parents can understand and meet the needs and requests of their child. Parents and children develop social bonding through signed conversations. And both parent and child become less frustrated.

SIGNING VS. TALKING

While some parents may worry that signing will hamper a child's verbal language development, research has proven otherwise. Burnham reports, "Results suggest that children who learn sign language or 'baby sign' at an early age are able to express themselves verbally much earlier than children who were exposed to spoken language alone. Therefore, sign language has become a frequent therapy tool used with children demonstrating expressive language delays, as the use of sign most definitely facilitates or jump-starts a child's use of actual words or verbal communication."



PROFESSIONAL EVALUATION

Consult with your child's speech/language pathologist or therapist for specific recommendations on whether a system of signing could meet your child's unique needs. The therapist will evaluate factors such as the fine motor skills of your child's hands, their visual acuity and other factors that could impact the potential success of using sign language.

TYPES OF SIGN LANGUAGE

While most people have heard of American Sign Language (ASL), other forms of sign language are



frequently used with children who are not deaf or hard of hearing, but who are experiencing speech or language delays due to other factors.

"ASL is very complex, and it doesn't follow the syntax of spoken English. ASL can be very challenging unless a child is in a community or living environment where ASL is used extensively all around him or her," says Danielle Waters, MS CCC-SLP, of Children's Speech Therapy Center in Herndon and Ashburn, Virginia.

The most common alternate form of sign language is Signed Exact English (SEE). SEE has been in use since the early 1970s and uses some of the vocabulary of ASL. However, due to its structure, SEE is generally much easier to learn for people who are already familiar with the rules and syntax of spoken English. (See Resources.)

GETTING STARTED

To start signing with your child, choose a few signs for things that are most important to your child, such as their favorite activities, foods or toys (i.e., ball, play, cookie, milk). Think about situations where your child gets frustrated because they can't communicate what

they want, and find related signs to use during those situations. Don't introduce signs for words your child can already say verbally.

Waters recommends always using signs "in context". In other words, use the sign when actually doing or using or giving the item you're signing. "Parents sometimes ask about using flash cards or doing signing 'drills' with a child - but these rarely work because the child doesn't link the sign to the actual object," she cautions.

Use sign language along with spoken language. For instance, when handing a child a ball, make the sign for "ball" and also say, "ball". "Try to use the signs as appropriate in different settings so the child learns that the hand movements mean a specific thing," says Waters. "Repetition is important."

Burnham urges parents to be consistent with signing. Use the sign every time you would use the word. Make sure siblings, teachers and others in your child's life also know the set of signs you're teaching and that they use the signs consistently.

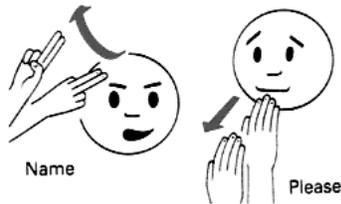
"It may sound obvious, but make sure your child is looking at you before you begin signing," Waters says. "Be sure your child sees the sign you're making along

with hearing you speaking.”

When your child attempts to mimic signs, they may or may not look like the actual sign at first. Offer plenty of encouragement. Repeat the sign yourself and say the word again.

“Parents can also take their child's hands and physically help their child to make the sign,” says Burnham. “Then say, 'Oh, you want the ball' - or whatever it is they've just signed. Kids love doing signs. It's interactive and fun - and they're learning how to communicate in a positive way.”

Waters concludes, “Communication is the key. If you can relieve frustration for a child by giving them the means to have their needs met through signing, you are making a huge impact on that child's well being.” You may, in fact, be offering them a lifeline of language. ■



RESOURCES

Language and speech development:

- Online checklist of speech and language development milestones in children: www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/voice/thebasics_speech_andlanguage.asp NOTE: This should not be used as a substitute for professional screening and evaluation!
- Article from ASHA for parents, “Late Blooming or Language Problem?” www.asha.org/public/speech/disorders/Late-Blooming-or-Language-Problem.htm
- Book: *Childhood Speech, Language & Listening Problems: What Every Parent Should Know* by Patricia McAleer Hamaguchi (John Wiley & Sons, 2001)

Finding a speech/language professional:

- Searchable database of speech/language pathologists • www.asha.org/proserv/

Related organizations

- American Speech-Language-Hearing Assoc
10801 Rockville Pike • Rockville, MD 20852
800-638-8255 • www.asha.org
- National Institute on Deafness & Other Communication Disorders
National Institutes of Health
31 Center Drive, MSC 2320 • Bethesda, MD
800-241-1044 • www.nidcd.nih.gov

Sign language:

- *Signing Exact English: Pocket Edition* by Esther Zawolkow (Modern Signs Press, 1993)

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(continued from Respite p. 31)

- Find a teenager in your neighborhood or through a teen service organization that might be willing to offer care a few afternoons a week.
- Talk with other parents or your local parent support group to see if anyone can offer suggestions or ideas for respite or babysitting.
- Contact area family support and parent advocacy programs such as your local Parent to Parent group or Parent Resource Center in the public schools.
- Call local disability organizations to see what respite, family support, or financial assistance they can provide (Arc chapter, community services board, early intervention program).
- Contact area child care centers or family child care providers to see if they are interested in providing some part-time care for your child.
- Enroll your child in a recreational or extra curricular activity that they enjoy.
- Plan ahead for summer and explore summer camp experiences for your child including day camps and overnight programs.
- If you want to hire your own respite provider, consider placing an ad at your local college or university. Social work, special education, psychology, and physical therapy students are always looking for experience with children with special needs.
- Be creative with your work and family schedules so that you and your spouse each have some time to do individual activities, as well as spend together as a couple! ■

This article was excerpted and adapted from *A Practical Guide to Respite for Your Family* (1996) by Molly Dellinger-Wray and Monica Uhl, *Partnership for People with Disabilities*, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

Respite Web Resources

Virginia Respite Directory and Summer Camps
www.vcu.edu/partnership/Respite2

ARCH National Respite Network and Resource Center
www.archrespite.org

Parent to Parent of Virginia
www.ptpofva.com

The Arc of Virginia
www.arcofva.org

VA Association of Community Services Boards
www.vacsb.org